



# THE NASW SHIFT PROJECT: SUICIDE PREVENTION FOR ADOLESCENT GIRLS

## PROTECTIVE FACTORS

If *risk factors* increase the probability of negative outcomes for youths, then *protective factors* promote positive outcomes. Protective factors enhance resilience in youths by promoting healthy development and mitigating risk factors.

Resilience represents the ability to rebound or persevere in the face of stressful events, circumstances, or situations. Resilient youths are adaptive, and handle stressful situations in spite of obstacles around them. They typically develop remarkable coping skills, confidence, and self-esteem, and are generally able to make positive contributions to society.

Protective factors are at the core of understanding why some adolescent girls thrive and adapt despite stressful or difficult circumstances, while others deteriorate.

**PROTECTIVE FACTORS**

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Are the building blocks for resilience

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Protect and nurture adolescents in high risk situations

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Promote well-being

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Reduce the likelihood of teenage suicide

Understanding the dynamics of resilience, and the intricate interchange of risk and protective factors, has been shown to bolster intervention and prevention efforts in various situations, including adolescent suicide. The intermingling of risk and protective factors may represent one of the most critical components for reducing suicide among teen girls. It is widely accepted by most researchers (or experts) in the field of adolescent suicide that adolescent girls with increased protective factors engage in less risky or harmful behaviors.

Protective factors associated with reducing the incidence of suicide among teen girls include:

- Access to mental health and substance abuse services
- Strong family and community connections and supports
- Restricted access to guns and other means of suicide
- Skills in problem solving and conflict resolution
- Religious and cultural beliefs systems that discourage suicide
- Good health and access to health care
- Supportive peers

### Access to mental health and substance abuse services

Given the relatively high co-occurrence of mental illness and substance abuse in adolescent suicide among girls, identifying and treating psychiatric disorders and substance abuse problems is critical. Unfortunately, evidence exists of disparities in diagnosis and treatment of certain ethnic groups, including African American and other youth of color. Having access to effective psychological clinical care for mental health and substances abuse problems is an essential first step in reducing the suicide rate among adolescent girls.

### Strong family and community connections and supports

Parents and other family members can have an enormous influence—positive or negative—on adolescent girls’ physical and mental well-being. A dysfunctional family can contribute to suicide and suicidal behaviors, whereas a caring, nurturing, and supportive family can buffer youth from suicidal behaviors. This has been found to be especially true among younger teenage girls. Strong connections to families and community resources are among the most significant protective factors.

### Restricted access to guns and other means of suicide

A key protective factor in reducing suicide among teen girls is to be aware of the methods commonly used by this population, including asphyxiation, cutting





arteries, overdosing on prescription or other drugs, carbon monoxide poisoning, and firearms. (Note: This is not a conclusive list.) To ensure that a teenage girl who is at-risk for suicide remains safe, all efforts should be taken to restrict access or opportunity to these and other methods of suicide. This may include removing a gun from a home or using trigger locks and locked cabinets for firearms and ammunition.

### **Skills in problem solving and conflict resolution**

Adolescents with sharpened problem solving and conflict resolution skills tend to view problems and challenges through a wider scope than do those with limited or poor coping skills. Consequently, they do not readily consider suicide as a first or only option to escape from a stressful event or situation.

### **Religious and cultural belief systems that discourage suicide**

Certain religious or cultural beliefs, including values or practices surrounding the meaning of life, are thought to serve as protective factors for reducing suicide behaviors. Some studies have offered religious beliefs as an explanation for lower suicide rates in particular ethnic groups or populations, such as African American teens.

### **Good health and access to health care**

Promoting overall physical health has been shown to aid in reducing the prevalence of adolescent suicidal behaviors. Unfortunately, disparities exist among some adolescents, particularly youths of color, who often

lack adequate health insurance, and thus are not seen regularly by physicians. There is also a need for training to assist primary care physicians in screening for risk factors, such as depression and other psychiatric illnesses, substance abuse, and behavior problems.

### **Supportive peers**

Positive peer relationships have been shown to have direct and indirect roles in preventing suicide and reducing suicidal behaviors. Specifically, they have been found to buffer at-risk teenage girls from suicide ideations and also from dysfunctional families, especially among older teenage girls.

Simply targeting and eliminating risk factors may reduce the occurrence of suicide among teenage girls, but more can be done. Reducing risk factors, while simultaneously enhancing protective factors is proven to be more effective. This combination yields an array of opportunities for reducing suicide among teenage girls and is more likely to promote positive youth development and resistance to suicide over time.

**The more protective factors surrounding teenage girls at-risk for suicide, the better the chances are for survival and health development.**

